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ABSTRACT

The model presented by the preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, is one of cooperation and collaborations among teachers, parents, and children; curriculum based on the "project approach," and constructivist learning philosophy, which states that children construct their knowledge and values as a result of interactions with and action on the physical and social world. American early childhood educators and researchers have expressed notable interest in the Reggio Emilia programs; however differences in the American and European thinking attitudes within a macro society, and cultural conventions make adapting or transporting methods with European roots difficult at best. An example of differences in thinking would be the way Americans have discarded European traditions of evaluating ideas and systems of thought according to "intellectual consistency" or aesthetic appeal. Cultural differences include: individualism versus collectivism; the American emphasis on "equalitarianism"; forms of activity of doing rather than being; the separation of work and play; and the dichotomy between competition and affiliation. Several elements need to be in place in American schools before any successful transitions from preschool to elementary school can take place, including preparation of children for such transitions, involvement of parents in each step of the process, and continuity of program through developmentally diverse and age/individual appropriate curricula. Although the Reggio Emilia schools do not have administrators or head teachers, their programs support the administrator's practical role in promoting development. Administrators must promote teachers and children to be curriculum makers; invite parents to be part of the classroom; allow time for observing the project process; allow planning time for teachers; and encourage and support practitioners by giving them time to develop. Contains nine references. (HTH)

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"Early Childhood Education and Beyond: Can we adapt the practices and philosophies from the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy into our Elementary Schools in America?"

Notable interest in the past five years is being expressed by American early childhood educators and reseachers in the preschool programs (ages 3-6 years) in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Americans' have become aware of these quality preschools of Reggio Emilia as a result of two events: Newsweek's (1991) feature of Reggio Emilia as being "the best preschools in the world," and the nation-wide traveling exhibition of children's work from Reggio Emilia, Italy called "The Hundred Langauges of Children."

The model presented by the Reggio Emilia infant/toddler daycare centers and preschools is one of cooperation and collaboration among adults as well as children. Parents and other community members are intricately involved in school decision-making processes through their participation in school-based Parent Teacher Boards as well as community-wide committees that report to the town council. Parents and teachers have formed a powerful partnership that enables a more thorough understanding of each child's interests and strengths. In addition, this parent-school cooperation creates a strong sense of community among the adults involved.

The curriculum of Reggio Emilia preschools is characterized by what Katz and Chard (1989) describe as the "project approach." While an

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appreciation of the visual and performing arts may be found of exceptionally high quality, so, too, is the display and documentation of the children's work extraordinary.

The underpinnings for the psycho-philosophy of Reggio Emilian preschools is best described as that of a constructivist learning theory. Constructivists state that children construct their knowledge and values as a result of interactions with and action on the physical and social world.

Some difficulties in attempting to transport or adopt educational models or approaches from European roots are established in the differences in the American and European patterns of (1) Thinking, (2) Attitudes within the macro society, and (3) Cultural conventions or dispositions. In other words, we must try to understand the respective cultural determents that affect the degree to which adaptation of a particular educational theory or approach, that is, Reggio Emilia, will be effectively implemented. Before I describe what elements of the Reggio Emilia preschool model-approach-theory- I believe are adaptable to the American elementary school settings- I will provide a few pertinent examples of the differences in American and European thinking, attitudes about the nature of society, and social conventions that are the standards of behavior most often found in these cultures.

I. PATTERNS OF THINKING

Americans are somewhat distrustful of theories which seem remote from some kind of application. Over time, Americans have been consistently pressed to show the utility of ideas and theories. An example of

this distrust of theories without application with respect to Reggio Emilia practices is our limited understanding of and faint endorsement for the social constructivist theoretical framework of Vygotsky, Issacs, and Wertssch - which assumes that knowledge and knowing have their origins in social interaction and engagements- the essential undergirding of the Reggio Emilia approach. A difficult construct to apply because it is not easily measured.

Americans have discarded the European traditions of evaluating ideas and systems of thought according to "intellectual consistency or aesthetic appeal. One obvious example of this abandonment of European traditions is Reggio Emilia's (Italian) natural sense of beauty, design, function, and environmental attractiveness. Incidentally, I am reminded of this European tradition of beauty and order that American's fell in love with and attempted to adopt after they observed the impressively attractive and functional displays of children's work in the British Primary Schools during the late 1960's - 70's, and early 80's.

Americans have a current need to reaffirm their theories - and their ideas require validation by application and by becoming institutionalized. For instance, in the late 1920's and 1930's, when the political power bases in the educational communities choose Edward L.Thorndike and his "Science of Measurement" over John Dewey's canons of child-centeredness and hands-on inquiry- as their ultimate psycho-philosophical vision, this legacy continues today as we value the single notion of intelligence quotient, grade levels of achievement, and specific learning

agenda for whole groups of children at a given age level. This of course is replicated in all too many of our mechanistically organized institutions we call schools for children.

Americans like to think of the world as composed of facts not ideas. Their process of thinking is generally inductive- that is -beginning with facts and proceeding to ideas. This is of course the converse to the thinking of the educators of Reggio Emilia. For children of Reggio Emilia, intellectual inquiry begins with their interests, ideas, and theories. The Project-method, promoted and valued by America's John Dewey in the 1920's is flourishing successfully today in Reggio.

PART II. ATTITUDES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MACRO SYSTEM AND CULTURAL STANDARDS OF BEHAVIOR.

Some examples of the cultural attitude differences between the two macro cultures that effects the degree of American adaptation of the Reggio Emilia approach (micro-culture) are the attitudes toward:

Individualism verses Collectivism: Politically and educationally, this might be the most prominent obstacle for authentic adaptation of the Reggio Emilia model. Individualism verses Collectivism has something to do with the forms of government people have chosen and under which they have become socialized and conditioned - for example- American constitutional democracy vs Italian social-communism. The geopolitical location of Reggio Emilia is significant for it has been a wealthy region in

Emilia Romagna for centuries- The food, wine, and political ideology traveled through Bologna to Reggio Emilia in a direct line from Genoa to Venice. Reggio Emilia is without a doubt the Region with the most highly developed and most generally subsidized social services in all of Italy- above all, in the area of child welfare, There is a long history of collective agriculture and small industry in the region: cheese, wine, ham, plastics, and coincidentally, but not surprising, they have elected a form of social-communism in the region for decades. American constitutional democracy and Italian socialism does not a compatable system make.

Interestingly enough, along with individualism, Americans also embrace **an attitude of equalitarianism**. In our educational settings- on the one hand- we value independence, self directed learning, and promotion of positive self images- Accordingly, on the other hand, our prevailing social attitudes and teaching targets are often defined by decisions based on what is best for the group, the middle- the average. This of course is challenged by our stress for individual differences, identifying the gifted and talented, and special recognition of individual learning styles. European notions are more clear cut and one that features more collective wisdom, group decision making, sharing of the group's efforts, and the idea that the community is somehow larger than the sum of its parts. A practical example of this federation of learners in Reggio is the piazza where children share their collect thoughts and efforts with their faithfully and appreciative peers, school staff, and of course parents. The piazza, like the middle age market place, is an area in each school where people gather to share, and

reaffirm their affiliation with the entire group and the group goals. Community building is valued over individualization.

Another cultural attitude difference between the two macro cultures that effects the degree of American adaptation of the Reggio Emilia approach (micro-culture) are the attitudes toward the **Forms of activity or doing rather than being.** This attitude reflects the image that doing is the denominate activity for Americans. "Getting things done" is worth while. In schools, we require planning, organization, and a somewhat strict form of management so things get done. Covering the curriculum instead of uncovering the potentials and the opportunities inherent within the curriculum is the normative attitude. In contrast to the American attitude, Reggio Emilia schools are not operating under a strict clock or time table of activities that need to be done.

Futhermore, learning in Reggio takes on a more in-depth understanding of a phenomena because learning is not measured by time and coverage. We must remember that Reggio Emilia has evolved from a long history of psychco-philosophical and educational ideas, as well as, theoretical frameworks - from Rousseau to Pestalozzi, from Froebel to Dewey, Vygotsky and Piaget, to David Hawkins and Howard Gardner- all of whom profess the construction of knowledge/knowing is based upon actions with and on the environment. Americans want activities that are measurable- these accomplishments- assessments and evaluations are prime outcomes for our children's doing at school.

In all cultures, Maslow wrote passionately about the characteristics of

being - that is, self-actualizing or the motivational and cognitive life of fully evolved people. For such **being**, activities tend to be intrinsic wholes, without comparisons- The outcomes are defined in the development of all aspects of the self as an integrated whole- the notion of teaching to "The Whole Child " energes. This contrasts with DOING, which emphasizes visible and measurable actions- BEING introduces the idea of development of the person which is often-times absent in the Doing form of activity.

The Separation of Work and Play - One of the most important attitude distinctions in the forms of activity in American culture and which is certainly reflected in American school life is the separation of work from play- For Americans, school work is pursued as a preparation for a specific job, making a living, so to speak- A direct legacy of the Thorndick's (Learning as preparation for life) and Dewey's (working to learn) paradigm split. Play on the other hand, is relief from the drudgery and regularity of work and is enjoyable in its own right. However, many Americans engage in recreation with the same seriousness of purpose expended on work- one only has to observe the elementary school-age afterschool & Saturday soccer and baseball exibitions. European cultures, especially the Italians, do not usually allow work to interfere with the amenities of living- play and vacations are the direct opposite of work- Reggio schools believe in play for its own sake. - American schools that operate on the notion that children learn through play and children's play is their work are the exception rather than the rule.

A final example of the differences in social conventional

attitudes that more or less guide people's behavior, is the **dichotomy between competition and affiliation**. Competition is the primary method American's motivate members of a group and the basic emphasis on American school culture. Europeans, especially the Italians, have an overt aversion to competition, and are likely to show more strongly developed affiliations - that is- referring to the social need for the company of others for companionship. In the philosophy of the Reggio schools, the fact that they embrace so passionately the work of Vygotsky, Paulo Freire, and Mihaly Csikszentmilhaly represents the deep seeded roots of affiliation through social constructivism. As yet, we have not fully explored the power nor the potential of this effective social learning theory.

Of course there are many more generalizations that juxiposes the two cultures, but I think you have the idea that American adoptions of educational methods and practices from another culture are most difficult and, at best, we need to move in such a direction with cautious optimism. I believe there are certain procedures that need to be in place in the American settings before any successful transitions from preschool to elementary school can take place. For example- I list four elements for successful preschool to elementary school transitions for young children and families as they move between settings. "P.I.C.C." anyone of these significant elements and educational staffs can facilitate transitions by:

1. **P**reparing children for such transitions;
2. **I**nvolving parents in each step of transition process.
3. **C**ontinuity of program through providing developmentally diverse and

age/individual appropriate curricula;

4. **C**ommunicating regularly between preschool staffs, parents, and elmentary school staffs.

There are a few strategies which teachers and administrators can utilize to plan developmentally diverse and appropriate curricula for preschoolers transitioning to elementary schools - Those that I DEEM important are:

• **D**eeper understandings can be fostered by allowing more elaboration of time on children's interest and activities.

• **E**ncourage more joint planning of activities and cooperation among children.

• **E**nvironment used as the third teacher- promote more emphasis on stimulating children's emerging multiple modes of expression in such areas as literacy, numeracy, and oracy.

• **M**ore focus on the development of independent work habits and promotion of children's natural instincts to follow their own interests and ideas.

We must recognize other differences that exist between preschool and elementary programs- For example:

• group size in preschool programs may be relatively small- 15-20 children in center based programs with 2 or 3 teaching staff, and even smaller in home based programs. In elementary schools, there may be 25 or more children to 1 teacher.

• Preschool program schedules may be flexible; elementary schools

may be required to adhere to a time scheduled based in part on cooperative uses of playgrounds, cafeterias, gyms, and buses.

• preschool programs may be smaller and more community based; primary programs usually are part of a larger institution with older children and different educational expectations.

• preschool programs may be privately or cooperatively administered by parents; elementary schools parents belong to a system that is governed by an elected or appointed board.

Conclusions

As an administrator for over twenty years, in four different countries, I feel I have a message for other administrators. I firmly believe we have an important enabling role to play for all early childhood practitioners. Reggio Emilia preschools do not have administrators or headteachers - but we do. Accordingly, after carefully observing and studying the Reggió Emilia Experience, learning from children, educators, and from my international administrative perspective, I endorse and support the Administrator's Practical Role in Promoting Development -The Aim of Education:

* Promote teachers and children to be the ***curriculum makers.***

* Encourage teachers to share their successes with each other and with children and parents.

* Provide plenty of space around the school for documentation and display so process and product can be shared with children, parents and teachers.

* Go out of your way to invite parents to be part of classrooms and the school.

* Visit, on a regular basis- early childhood classrooms and ask a child- not "What are you doing now," but, "What are you doing to do next?" I suspect that you will be pleasantly surprised.

* Allow yourself the time for observing the project process approach - Ideally, from start to completion- at least at different stages.

* Allow an abundance of planning time for teachers; Reggio teachers have 6 hours out of their 36 hours for planning time each week.

* Budget adequate funds for quality materials and plenty of supplies such as video tapes, tape recorders, a video printer, cameras, and film for documentation and display and subsequent planning of activities.

* Encourage and support the practitioners by giving them time to develop -Note- The Reggio Emilia Experience has been evolving for over 40 years!

* Recognize and celebrate the important role that early childhood practitioners play in the growth and development of children and parents.

After all is said and done -

* What really matters at school is how each child spends his/her day - Ask this question each day - "Has it been the best day possible for each and every child.?"

Roland Barth, a British primary school enthusiast during the movement in the United States and a leader today in advocating the principal's role as change agents in schools, passionately states ..."the

fundamental mandate of school reform is to examine every decision, practice and policy, and to ask of it the question: "What, if anything, is anyone learning as a consequence of this?"

Ironically, some twenty years ago, Ron Edmonds introduced us to the words, "All children can learn"... I remember what Loris Malaguzzi, the founding father of the Reggio Experence stated to me- "We do not educate -- we are educated in Reggio schools." Let me submit that all school administrators and early childhood practitioners can learn- that is what it means to be educators- in any country.

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